

Ancient Fanfiction: Substitute King

By Celine Baumbach

“Damqi?” I asked the man standing on the balcony. I joined him there, leaning on the balustrade.

“What are you thinking about?”

He let out a long breath, surveying the courtyard below. Then he glanced up at the palace walls in the distance, probably imaging the city of Babylon that sprawled beyond it. He must be thinking about death again – his death specifically, I thought. He was predictable and annoying like this.

“You know I hate silence, husband.”

He hated that word, and it made him turn around to look at me. He didn’t see me as his wife, and I could not argue with that. I shuddered at the thought of being married to someone like him. He was self-absorbed and constantly angry, and a part of me had decided that dying was not so bad when the alternative could have been a husband like Damqi.

Of course, had the two of us not been chosen as substitutes for the royal couple, we never would have met, much less been married. Our fates intertwined the moment the priests had divined the solar eclipse that portended grave danger for the crown prince, each had their good and bad sides. For me, it meant that my family would be better off: For them my death would bring great honor, and with one less mouth to feed they would get through the winter much better. Not to speak of my father’s relief at having one less dowry to pay.

“I’m thinking about how Shamash-shum-ukin and his line will pay for this,” Damqi said.

It made me laugh, because of course that was what he was thinking of. Damqi hated his fate almost as much as he hated me: His father was the chief administrator of the temples, and as such he thought being chosen as the king’s substitute was below him. The Babylonian elite saw themselves on the same level as the Assyrian royals who ruled our kingdom these days – for them to be chosen had been a slap in the face.

“You truly are Babylonian,” I teased him. “Is there no honor in dying to protect the crown prince? Is it not an honor to be chosen as his substitute?”

That made him angry. “It would have been an honor had I been a lesser man.”

“Had you been the child of a farmer, like me,” I added with a grin. Riling him up was the easiest thing in the world, but I did not enjoy it. I simply had nothing better to say.

I pointed at the courtyard below. “You can always jump.”

“There would be even less honor in dying like that. But you wouldn’t understand.” He huffed and turned sharply, heading back inside. I let him go. I could have pointed out that I understood him a little – I too would have preferred to live – but I did not want him to know me, my thoughts.

The sky above us was slowly lightening again, the moon withdrawing from the sun. Just like that the fate the priests had divined for Shamash-shum-ukin abated.

“At least it will be over soon,” I muttered quietly to myself.

Context:

The so-called “Substitute King” is a Mesopotamian practice where a king, another royalty, or a prisoner of war was replaced with a substitute to be sacrificed to the evil fate that had been divined for the king by astronomers. Omens of such a fate were mainly eclipses, which ancient Mesopotamian astronomers could predict with reliability. Damqi, the substitute in the story really existed, and he was the substitute for the Assyrian crown prince Shamash-shum-ukin who ruled the Babylonian part of the Assyrian empire at that time. The substitute usually was a lower-class citizen, but in the case of Damqi he was part of the Babylonian nobles. He was chosen most likely to inspire fear in the unruly Babylonians. Once the king was no longer in danger, the substitute and the wife he had been given were ritually killed and the king restored once more to his position. The story I wrote is not attested as such but I wanted to explore the way a woman might feel about being chosen in such a fashion in a patriarchal world, while also exploring how Damqi, someone with privileges, might feel about losing those. The result was a dialogue between two people with different upbringings and different beliefs staring down the same fate.

Resources:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2017/solar-eclipse-substitute-king#>

<https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5927.3-the-concept-and-reality-of-the-substitute-king-in-mesopotamia-and-iran>

Quote: “The sky above us was slowly lightening again, the moon withdrawing from the sun. Just like that the fate the priests had divined for Shamash-shum-ukin abated. ‘At least it will be over soon,’ I muttered quietly to myself.”